Inclusion and Marginalization of Learners in Secondary Education (Finland)

Peltola, Marja

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Author 1	Marja Peltola
Author 1 affiliation	Marja Peltola is post-doctoral researcher at University of Helsinki, Finland
Author 2	Anna-Maija Niemi , Sonja Kosunen
Author 2 affiliation	Anna-Maija Niemi is post-doctoral researcher at University of Helsinki, Finland. Sonja Kosunen is assistant professor at University of Helsinki, Finland.
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Glossary terms

Minoritization: Minoritization and minoritized position refer to the social processes of positioning parts of the population, based on their ethnicity, migration history or both, as ethnic minorities and therefore as implicitly inferior to the the ethnic majority – or the majoritized population. Unlike the seemingly objective term "ethnic minority", minoritization draws attention to power relations and relationality in defining positions of ethnic minorities and majorities.

LGBTIQ+: LGBTIQ+ is an acronym aiming for inclusiveness by encompassing the diversity of sexual and gender minorities. The letters refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer, and + acknowledges that the diversity of sexual minority identities extends even beyond these categories.

Three-tier support system: Reformed in 2011, educational support in the Finnish school system is organized in three categories: general, intensified and special support. All pupils are entitled to general support, which is part of everyday teaching and learning processes. If general support is not sufficient for fulfilling a pupil's needs, then pedagogical assessment is arranged and a plan for intensified support is drawn up, followed by a learning plan. If intensified support is not sufficient either, more extensive pedagogical assessments are made, leading to an official decision concerning special support.

1. Research on inclusion and marginalization

Research has shown that levels of inclusion in Finnish secondary education vary according to gender, social class, ethnicity, sexuality and other factors (e.g. Käyhkö 2006; Tolonen 2012; Aaltonen & Karvonen 2016). The assumed category of an "ordinary" pupil excludes children and young people from racialized minorities, with LGBTIQ+ identities and with disabilities, which results in both structural inequalities and personal experiences of exclusion (e.g. Alanko 2014; Kurki 2019; Mietola & Niemi 2014; Holmberg et al. 2018). Language and religion potentially produce further divisions in secondary education (From & Sahlström 2017; Tainio et al. 2019; Zilliacus 2013, 2014; see also Huilla & Kosunen in this book). These differences have consequences in the transition from lower-secondary (13–16-year-olds, compulsory) to upper-secondary (16–19-year-olds) education, and may

lead to further educational inequality and marginalisation (e.g. Kilpi-Jakonen 2011, 2017; Niemi 2015; Nylund et al. 2018).

In Finland, the concept of inclusion has been primarily attached to special needs education, meaning teaching pupils with special educational needs in general classrooms alongside other pupils and supporting them individually (Niemi & Mietola 2017). It is only recently that the discussion has included issues related to ethnic minorities, racialization, sexual orientation and gender identity.

2. Demographics

Finland has 5.5 million inhabitants and two official languages, Finnish and Swedish (5.3% of the population). The national Churches are the Lutheran (69.7% of the population) and the Orthodox (about 1.1%) (OSF 2019a). There is an indigenous Sami population and long-established minorities of Roma, Tatars, Jews and Russians. Among 13–18-year-olds, the percentage of pupils "with a foreign background" was 6.9 in 2017 (OSF 2019a, including so-called second generation but excluding those with a mixed heritage). The position of young people with a migrant background varies greatly according to their length of stay in Finland, their migratory background and their citizenship status, among other things. Unaccompanied refugee minors form a small but particularly vulnerable group.

According to a large national School Health Survey, about ten per cent of 15–16-year-olds identified themselves as other than heterosexual, and 5.6 per cent experienced their gender as non-binary (Luopa et al. 2017).

10.8 per cent of lower-secondary-level pupils received intensified support in 2018; 9.7 per cent received special support, of whom 32 per cent studied in special schools or educational groups. 20 per cent of students in upper-secondary vocational education received special support in 2017, of whom 86 per cent studied in mainstream groups whereas the rest were in special groups or special vocational-education institutes. (OSF 2019.) Thus, despite the principle of inclusion, a significant proportion of pupils with special educational needs still study in separate pedagogical environments. There is variation in how effectively schools are able to support their pupils. The current educational level of disabled youth is relatively high: almost all young people undertake some studies after basic education, but not all programs lead to a vocational qualification or to employment (Ahonen & Lampinen 2017; Kauppila et al. 2018).

3. Policies and laws

The principle of universalism shapes the organization of secondary schools. Fundamental principles include allocation to a neighborhood school and the avoidance of "dead-ends" or the inability of young people to access higher education because of their earlier choices. Tracking starts late in Finland by international standards, after lower-secondary school at the age of 15 (approximately). Upper-secondary education is provided in separate general (chosen by 48% of the age-cohort in 2018) and vocational (52%) schools. Even though the system allows progression from vocational to higher education, in 2017 only 10 per cent of university students had a vocational upper-secondary education, which includes those who had also pursued other studies (Vipunen 2019).

The core curriculum in both comprehensive and upper-secondary education reflects and is based on Equality and Anti-discrimination legislation, which acknowledges gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity as potential grounds for illegal discrimination. All state officials, including teachers and other school employees, are obliged to promote equality on these grounds.

Up until 2018, general upper-secondary schools were not legally obliged to provide special education. The new law endorsed during the autumn of 2018 will come into force and be implemented through the new curricula during 2019–2021. (see Niemi & Laaksonen 2019.)

4. Inequality

Children and young people from diverse minoritized backgrounds face racism and othering in secondary school, which causes fear and exclusion (e.g. Kurki 2019; Souto 2011; Rastas 2009). Young people from a migrant background are less likely to have an upper-secondary qualification. Over 86 per cent of young people in Finland matriculate from upper secondary school within eight years after completing lower-secondary education, whereas the percentage varies from 50 to 76 among several migrant groups. Family educational background and earlier school success explain a significant proportion of these differences, but not all. Non-Finnish citizens and visibly minoritized groups are the most vulnerable. (Kilpi-Jakonen 2013, 2017.) Pupils with an ethnic-minority background also tend to be guided towards vocational rather than academic tracks (Kurki 2019; Souto 2016). Newly arrived young migrants and unaccompanied minors aged 17 and above, when compulsory education finishes, risk missing out on upper-secondary education (Kivijärvi et al. 2015).

The Roma have historically been excluded from education and systematically subjected to societal assimilation through education (Helakorpi et al. 2018). Despite various measures and practices (Helakorpi et al. 2018), the educational transitions of Roma students remain disjointed and uncertain: general upper-secondary education is a rare choice, and under 10 per cent of them have a tertiary-level degree (Rajala et al. 2011; Rajala & Blomerus 2015).

Expectations, practices and materials in schools are heteronormative and often exclusive for LGBTIQ+-youth. Explicit acknowledgment of sexual and gender minorities is rare in curriculum documents, and neither teachers nor materials adequately address LGBTIQ+ issues in secondary schools. (Kjaran & Lehtonen 2018.) According to the results of a survey targeted at LGBTIQ+ youth, 75 per cent hid their sexual orientation or gender identity from teachers, and 50 per cent from their peers in school. About 60 per cent of sexual-minority and trans-youth respondents had experienced bullying, from 4.9 (sexual minorities) to 7.5 (trans) per cent of them experiencing it weekly or daily. A significant proportion of trans youth in particular reported that bullying had resulted in their non-attendance at school. (Alanko 2014.)

Special needs education is considered affirmative action, promoting educational equality in the Finnish school system. Simultaneously, it differentiates pupils and directs them towards different educational tracks (Mietola & Niemi 2014; Jauhiainen & Kivirauma 1997). Even though not visible in descriptions of the educational system, there are differentiated post-compulsory programs aimed at disabled students, most of which are based at separate special-education vocational institutes (Hakala et al. 2013). The overall educational level of disabled people is notably lower than that of the whole population (Eurostat 2017; Mahlamäki 2013), and there are marked differences between disability groups in terms of post-compulsory educational opportunities (Kauppila et al. 2018; Ahonen & Lampinen 2017; Hakala et al. 2013). The disabled people are less likely to matriculate from upper-secondary education and to continue to higher education (Kirjavainen et al. 2016). The majority of them study in vocational upper-secondary institutions, and a small minority in general upper-secondary education (Kirjavainen et al. 2016; Niemi & Mietola 2017).

With regard to social class, school choices concerning selective and specialized classes and language choices in primary and lower secondary school function as de facto streaming policies and socially segregative mechanisms (Kosunen et al. 2016, Seppänen 2006), which leads to between- and within-school segregation (Kosunen 2014) as members of the (upper) middle class successfully exercise

their choice options (Seppänen et al. 2015). Social class and gender also shape peer relations and popularity hierarchies within secondary schools, thus contributing in more subtle ways to experiences of inclusion/exclusion and preferred school trajectories (e.g. Käyhkö 2006; Tolonen 2012; Aaltonen & Karvonen 2016). The offspring of highly educated parents are known to progress from secondary education more quickly than children of parents with a basic or secondary education (OSF 2019b).

5. Assistance and resources

Preparatory teaching and the teaching of Finnish as a second language are targeted forms of support in comprehensive education for pupils with a migrant background. The support structures are less developed in upper secondary schools, however, and vary by municipality and school. (Kivijärvi et al. 2015)

A three-tiered support system provides support for learning in lower-secondary education, and upper secondary vocational schools offer special support. General upper secondary schools do not have established practices, and forms of support vary between schools and municipalities (see Niemi & Laaksonen, forthcoming).

Preparatory education for vocational training (VALMA), Preparatory training for work and independent living (TELMA) and Preparatory training for general upper-secondary education (LUVA) are examples of curriculum-based short-term programs aimed at the promoting educational transition from lower- to upper-secondary school, or to working life and independent living. The VALMA program is targeted at young people and adults who need the skills to undertake vocational education; the LUVA program promotes the transition to general upper-secondary education among migrant students, and TELMA is aimed at more severely disabled young people who are considered ineligible to apply for vocational education (see Kauppila et al. 2018).

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